

Remarks by Congressman Frank R. Wolf
Telework Remarks before the House Subcommittee on Federal Workforce and
Agency Organization
Mitigating the Impact of High Gas Prices on the American Workforce
November 16, 2005

Chairman Porter, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the benefits of teleworking.

To put it simply: Telecommuting works.

I have said many times that there is nothing magic in strapping ourselves into a metal box every day only to drive to an office where we sit behind a desk working on a computer.

Telecommuting is a traffic issue.

Telecommuting is an air quality and environmental issue.

Telecommuting is a continuity of operations issue in a time of emergency.

Telecommuting is an energy savings issue.

And telecommuting is a quality of life issue.

As the nation's largest employer, the federal government should be the model for telework. Because of a provision I inserted in the FY 2001 Transportation Appropriations bill, by the end of this year, all federal agencies must allow every eligible employee who wants to telework and whose job lends itself to telework to do so.

I have been disappointed at the federal government's efforts in implementing the FY 2001 law. Federal agencies are in clear violation of this act. Just last week I was contacted by several constituents with the Bureau of Prisons and the Farm Service Agency who are being denied their right to telework. This kind of attitude by federal agencies must end.

Telework is a win-win for the federal government. It increases worker productivity. It improves morale. It gives employees a chance to spend time with their families or simply use their free time as they see fit. It improves our air quality and it can save the federal government money by helping to reduce real estate costs and increase worker retention.

I've taken steps in both the FY 2005 and 2006 Science-State-Justice-Commerce Appropriations bills to show the agencies under the bill that teleworking is serious business. I inserted a provision in both spending bills to withhold \$5 million from the budgets of the departments of Commerce, Justice and State and now NASA, until they ensure that all their eligible workers are permitted to telecommute.

The bill also requires the departments and agencies to designate a “Telework Coordinator” to oversee the implementation and operation of telecommuting programs within each department. The departments and agencies also will be required to provide the Appropriations Committee with quarterly reports on the number of employees telecommuting.

I hope these provisions will get the telework point across and the agencies, from the top down, will start taking telework seriously. I do not like having to be so heavy-handed and threaten to withhold funding, but if that is what it is going to take to get the point across to federal agency managers, then that is what I will continue to do.

Following Hurricane Katrina, I sent President Bush a letter asking him to make telework a priority of his administration. In the letter, I point out that many of the nation’s leading security experts have pointed to telecommuting as key to ensuring that the government continues to operate during and after catastrophic events. I appreciate the efforts of the General Services Administration to pay the costs at telework centers for federal employees who wish to telework as a result of Hurricane Katrina and the recent spike in fuel costs.

I was contacted by federal contractors which conduct business in the region impacted by Hurricane Katrina and learned that many of these private sector businesses are utilizing telework in order to continue operations, but unfortunately, they are having a difficult time working with their federal government counterparts who are not being allowed to participate in telework programs. One of the businesses told me that “one of the things that would be incredibly helpful to many federal government and private sector employees in the Gulf Coast region would be a statement by the President and the Administration that the federal government is mandating that its agencies and activities actively encourage and support telecommuting.”

September 11, the anthrax scare, and now Hurricane Katrina have exposed vulnerabilities in our nation which can disrupt government and business operations. In the wake of these events, a government-wide telework program should be the cornerstone of the federal workplace to ensure that necessary telework habits are in place in the event of a similar disaster in the future. With a federal telework model, the private sector could also expand its telework options to ensure that the public and private sectors – which operate as partners in so many areas – remain operational during any disaster.

Finally, rising gas prices are having a major impact on our nation’s commuters who must travel dozens of miles each day to work, including federal employees. My congressional district includes the Shenandoah Valley. Early in the morning when I am heading to meetings or events in this area, I see a steady stream of cars coming from places like Winchester and Front Royal toward Washington to the federal workplace. These commutes can take two or more hours each way.

An effective federal telework program would help these commuters not only save on gas, it would help the federal government retain workers who might otherwise look to the private sector for higher salaries and a workplace closer to home.

In short, Telecommuting works. I would urge this subcommittee to get involved and consider legislation which would lead to increased teleworking opportunities for both the federal and private sectors.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for allowing me to participate in this hearing.

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